

# MATCH-MAKING CUSTOMS IN MUNSTER.

BY KATHARINE TYNAN.



I SUSPECT the custom of match-making among the Irish of Munster is in part the survival of the feudal system. In old days the chief, who was the beneficial father of his clan, selected, perhaps, mates for the young people without a dissentient voice. The Irish landlord of comparatively modern days claimed some such right as a precaution against the subdivision of land. He was not at all in the line of succession to the old chieftains; but his right of lordship in such a matter need not be the hardship it would be to those who insist on a free choice. Perhaps, too, the suspicion with which the Irish country priest as a rule regards love-making may be a factor in upholding the custom. None is so ready as he to crack jokes at the expense of the engaged couple, when the arrangement is made by authorized law and with the sanction of parents and pastor. But an ill-regulated love, in which without leave or licence a young couple take fire of each other, is quite another matter. The priests have seen on every side the fortunate results of the match-making system; for where is the marriage-tie so inviolably maintained as in Ireland? So to them Eros is a pagan deity indeed, and, for all his cherubic wings and dimpled cheeks, a wolf in sheep's clothing. It is scarcely to be expected that he should be in repute at the convent

schools where the girls spend the blossoming time, or with the celibate clergy.

“The god of Love, ah, benedicite,  
How mighty and how great a lord is he!”

But not in Munster. Not that the priests meddle with the match-making. Curiously enough, for some reason or other, “a priest's marriage” is supposed to be unlucky; and, except in the case of a relative, a priest seldom appears in the matter before the preliminaries are concluded.

Not often does the lot of the couple whose match is made call for pity. The girls are so accustomed to the old usage that their decorous dreams of the spouse to be provided for them are no more distracting than those of French damsels, who keep as straight a path as any marked out for human feet. The parallel goes as far as the marriage, but no further, since in the case of the French matron there is often the natural revenge of licence instead of liberty; while the Irish matron walks as discreetly as though she had had a happy season of sowing her innocent wild oats, and therefore was content with steadiness. Irish farmers often do not marry till quite middle age. They are the canniest class in the community, and have an obstinate way of considering themselves, so long as they remain

unmarried, the match of the youngest and prettiest girl in the barony. Often enough for the girl the delight of being mistress of a snug farmhouse, of a dairy, and a best parlour, and a jaunting car, outweighs the paltry difference of forty years or so, and she is well content. Occasionally an old gentleman of this kind will find that the young woman he has taken to his bosom is more than a yoke-fellow for him, and rather drives

by the fact that, years and years after, the little heiress was sought in marriage with scarcely less concession to ideal notions. The letter sent to the child's next of kin, a handsome and stern old American priest, was as business-like as though the bargain were over a calf. The main reason for the marriage seemed to be that the little heiress's lands joined those of the young *squireen* whose mother made the matter-of-fact proposal. The young

lady, who was making the grand tour, heard nothing of this strange offer. Father O'Connell answered for his young relative rather more haughtily than if he were an Irish instead of an Irish-American priest, and so the matter ended.

The young people who are the subjects of the custom do not, as a rule, consider their case a hard one. A handsome young woman in a Munster town openly expressed to me her scornful disbelief in love. "They marry for love," she said, "foreign in Dublin and Cork, maybe, but never here. There was one case I heard of here—it was before my time—of marrying for love"—oh, the scornful emphasis on the words!—"and it ended *bad*." This young woman had evidently no desire for the introduction of the unknown fire into the stagnant calm of the



A HANDSOME YOUNG WOMAN OF MUNSTER.

him than follows or paces with him, side by side. Occasionally the system results in downright cruelty, as in a case I knew where a girl, fresh from the convent school, was handed over to an octogenarian, who in his village shop had somehow amassed thirty or forty thousand pounds.

This poor child died of the horror of the bargain. She lived long enough to give birth to a girl-child, and then placidly closed her eyes on the dreary world and the wrinkled spouse. How little customs change in Munster is shown

little country town.

In Carleton's day there was such an institution as a match-maker, a sort of wise woman who was the connecting link between the two families. I do not know if she yet plies her trade in out-of-the-way places, but more usually the negotiations are opened by a convenient friend. Once started, they lapse into the hands of the respective fathers. The match-making is sometimes the occasion of a dance, though etiquette forbids any recognition of the situation by the invited guests. In such a case, while the attention of all is sup-



MORE THAN A YOKE-FELLOW FOR HIM.

posed to be riveted on the jig or the two-handed reel, the fathers carry on their bargaining at a table plentifully supplied with whisky and pipes and tobacco, in a steady corner where the heels of the dancers will not brush them nor the open gaze of the spectators follow them. Yet for all the elaborate pretence of ignorance,

Very often, of course, the negotiations are conducted more quietly. And again, they will be carried out at a fair or a market, where the fathers will retire to a quiet room in a public-house, and argue out the matter. A third person is often employed in such cases, who suggests at an awkward moment that the parties



THE FATHERS WILL RETIRE TO A QUIET ROOM IN A PUBLIC-HOUSE, AND ARGUE OUT THE MATTER.

the room is electric with interest. Perhaps only the actual dancers forget the match-making; for that extraordinary and graceful dance, the Irish jig, permits no divided allegiance. One who had been a famous step-dancer in his youth assured me that the dance has over a hundred different steps. But the old men and women, all smoking by the fireplace or on a high-backed settle, are in an agony of sympathetic interest. Not a gesture escapes notice, and when brows are wrinkled or fists clenched, telling that the negotiations, concluded as to coin and gear, have stuck fast in the mountain sheep or the Kerry cows, there is a murmur of suspense almost like a moan. Meanwhile the couple themselves are awkward and self-conscious. The youth has the resource of a pipe outside among the boys; the girl, the less bashful of the two, joins in the dance, and her self-consciousness lends her perhaps only a shyer charm, as she advances and retreats, and demurely foots it, in the most coquettish of all dances.

“split the difference.” My father, in his cattle-buying, has often acted as this convenient friend. There is a great deal of dramatic make-believe at this point. Each man asseverates most solemnly that he has reached the limit of his concessions. “Och sure, man alive! my purty little girl isn’t going a-begging! Sure, there’s *Jemmy Ryan*, beyant at the *Three Crosses*, leppin’ to get her for his boy; and though it’s myself that says it, a better or purtier little girl there’s not in the barony.” And the other, with diplomatic heat, for the negotiations are by no means intended to fall through: “’Deed then, *Martin*, that’s throe for you. An’ sure what else would the little girl be that’s come of a good stock and handsome people. But there’s them that’s covetin’ my boy, and that wouldn’t stop short at a milch-cow, nor a litter of pigs, no, nor a score of sheep, for the matter of that.” When both parties have declared themselves immovable, the friend steps in with his amiable suggestion. For a time he has to urge both parties to yield, which they do at last with a reluctant

heartiness. "Well, in God's name," one or the other will say, "we won't break Mr. —'s word." And then they shake hands over it, and there is general rejoicing.

I remember a Tipperary man, who bought cattle for my father, lamenting the decadence of his son and daughter, who had both departed from the good old style, and made love-matches. "Indeed and indeed," he lamented, "what's the world coming to at all, at all? My fine boy that I expected to make a match for with Kate Rooney, a snug man's daughter, he goes out without a word to me, and brings

the most easy-going of fathers, or his young people would scarcely have taken this original line.

I was once much amused at the comments of a Tipperary man when he was introduced by her father to a damsel of considerable social pretensions. The man was a great giant of an old fellow with a square, massive face, clean shaven, and a smooth black head. The city damsel was cainty in her silk and furs, fluttering along the wintry streets by her father's side, when they met. The men had known each other through some matter of business. "That's a fine young woman



THE MATCH HAS BEEN BROKEN OFF FOR A THREE-LEGGED POT.

home a girl from Dublin with just the clothes on her back. And that's not bad enough, but I've a little slip of a *girleen* that the other day had her hair hanging down her back, and she inthrojuices me last week to a lad *she* was to give me for a son-in-law *at the same price.*" Martin was  
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you've got for daughter, Mr. —," said the unabashed Tipperary man; "but it's high time she was married. I've a boy at home she might be taking a fancy to. For we both know, Mr. —, girls are bad stock. *They don't improve by keeping.*"

Sometimes a girl's matrimonial chances

are unfairly prejudiced by what an outsider would consider a trifling deficiency. For instance, a farmer's wife usually keeps a great number of geese, and makes many beds of their down. A feather bed is usually part of the dowry

thirteen head of cattle, two feather and two chaff beds, with sheeting, quilts, and blankets; three pieces of bleached linen, and a flock of geese of her own rearing." Well might Shane Fadh remark: "Upon the whole, among ourselves, it wasn't aisy to get such a fortune."



A MUNSTER FARMER.

of a farmer's daughter. Well, supposing there are five beds and six daughters, the chances of the youngest, who goes without a bed, are materially affected. Not many are so well provided for as Shane Fadh's wife in Carleton's story. "She had sixty guineas that her grandfather left her,

A part of this system of giving dowries has always seemed to me highly illogical. No matter how poor people may be, they scrape together enough to portion a daughter, or leave the daughters' dowries as a charge upon the land. The very same damsel who was scornful to me about love let in some light on the system. She had eleven brothers and sisters, and her mother held a farm on a famous Plan of Campaign estate. Of the dozen she was the only one who ever had the enterprise to "go foreign," as she herself expressed it, though the little town on the Atlantic sea-board was but nine miles from her home. The other eleven toiled at the farm-work, the men on the farm, the girls butter-making, pig-feeding, calf-rearing; in summer binding or gathering; in autumn dropping seed-potatoes in the fur-

rows. They were all at work, early and late, for the land is exhausted and unkindly. They never tasted meat but once a year, and that was a piece of American bacon on Christmas Day. Yet the girls had every one their *tocher* of a hundred and fifty, all except my sturdy

friend. "I'd no use for a fortune," she said; "for I never fancied men, young or old."

Now the illogical part of it is that the dowry the young men obtain with their brides goes, in nine cases out of ten, to portion off a sister; whence it seems to me that if there were no dowries given people would be, in a majority of cases, just as well off.

If match-making with a farmer's daughter has been broken off because of the deficiency of a feather bed, in the case of a labourer's marriage the match has been broken off for a three-legged pot.

A friend tells me this story of the suddenness with which marriages are made in Munster. "A young man I knew, a farmer, with a little land and four cows, lost his wife, a very good and careful woman. He had three children; and his mother, an old woman of seventy-eight, also lived with him. About two years after his wife's death I happened to be in the neighbourhood, and called in to see his mother, for whom I had a great liking. This was the day before Shrove Tuesday, the last day on which, according to the Lenten ordinances, you can be married till Easter Sunday. After a while I inquired for Larry, the widower. The

mother replied: 'Arrah wisha, agra, you see I'm too ould to be any use now, an' this morning he said he'd be off after breakfast, and scour the country, and wear out his shoe-leather in looking for a girl, and if he found a suitable one with a snug fortune, he'd be married, with the help of God, before to-morrow night. The notion was a sudden one, but may God speed him and bring him luck, for badly he needs a wife to mind the pigs and the childher, the cratures.'" My friend does not tell me if Larry succeeded in his quest. She adds: "An old sow is often a great bone of contention in match-making, and if she has littered fourteen *boneens* or so she is all the more desirable. A parish priest," she goes on, "once told me that in his twenty-five years of priesthood he had seen hundreds of marriages so made, after an acquaintance of a day or two, and scarcely ever saw one of them turn out unhappily."

I suppose the Munster match-makers would say, if they heard their honourable custom impugned, that "all's well that ends well." But as yet the custom is not on its trial, but accepted with absolute satisfaction. The curious thing is that it should exist among a people naturally so full of sentiment and emotion.